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HEADLINE: CUBA'S SCHOOL FOR EXPORTING MARXISM

BODY:

Jo Thomas is chief of The Times's Caribbean bureau. By Jo Thomas or reasons best known to themselves, the Cuban revolutionaries who took over the Colony Hotel in 1959 did not disturb the mural on the wall of the lobby that had welcomed American gamblers to the island hideaway. The painting shows Long John Silver watching his fellow pirates bury treasure while cabin boy Jim Hawkins looks on. Scholars disagree over whether the island where the hotel stands is the ''Treasure Island'' immortalized by Robert Louis Stevenson, but during the 16th and 17th centuries this piranha-shaped island 30 miles off the southwest coast of Cuba was the hiding place for Sir Francis Drake, Henry Morgan, Calico Jack Rackham and other pirates of the Spanish Main. Since then, it has been a penal colony, a haven for American expatriates during the early 1900's and a tourist resort. It has had many names; Christopher Columbus christened it Evangelista, and it was subsequently known as Santiago, Reina Amalia and the Isle of Pines. Three years ago, Fidel Castro renamed it Isla de la Juventu d, the Isle of Youth.

Several miles down from the now seedy Colony Hotel, on a road that cuts through pine trees, pink clouds of oleanders and rows of grapefruit trees, small boys in work clothes and bright blue rubber boots recently filed off a school bus, lined up to be issued childsize machetes and marched off to begin an afternoon's work in a setting as remote from their former lives as Treasure Island was for the fictional Jim Hawkins.

The island was renamed for these children, and for some 26,000 like them, from Cuba, Africa and Central America. During the past four years, planeloads of students have been brought to the island for schooling in mathemat-ics, chemistry, physics and Marxist ideology, all of which they are expected to apply when they eventually return to their homelands. It was not until three years ago that the island began attracting international attention. Even then, the effort to sow Cuban influence was overshadowed by reports in the Western press that some children had been brought to the island against their will.

''It really is a very 21st-century kind of thing,'' said Prof. Riordan Roett, director of the Latin American studies program at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, during a telephone interview. ''Some people who aren't out of the bush even a generation are learning the elements of physics and how to play soccer.''

Professor Roett visited the schools established for students from Namibia and Mozambique - each participating nation or territory is assigned its own school - and said afterward that he believed that Cuba's effort to gather primary- and secondary-school students from all the nations where there is a Cuban presence is unique. ''The Cubans laughingly showed us a spot for the Salvadoran

school,'' he said. There is, at the moment, no such school.

According to Professor Roett, the schools - which he called ''a wise move on Fidel Castro's part'' - follow a trend the Cubans began immediately after the revolution in 1959, with campaigns for literacy, public health and ''short-term substantive alterations in living conditions that demonstrate that socialism can function in a humane sense. This is an important lesson the (Russians) forgot a long time ago.''

He saw, however, ''no guarantee that the Cubans will win over this generation once they are back in their countries. There's no doubt they'll go back as Marxists, but there are many kinds of Marxists. I think the Cubans are whistling Dixie if they think Cuban Marxism will dominate Africa.''

A high-ranking State Department official knowledgeable about Cuba agreed that the project on the Isle of Youth is ''an unprecedented effort'' which officials in Washington hav e b een watching with concern.

''It shows the kind of priorities that Cubans give to their longrange commitment to international solidarity and wars of national liberation,'' he said. ''The shame of it is that this kind of education is extremely limited, rather poor and highly politicized. What you're creating are low-level technicians with no real faculties to test propositions they learn in the classrooms. It's different from bringing a guy on a Fulbright to the United States. He may or may not be pro-American when he leaves, but he has a greater capacity for testing what he learns.''

The project on the Isle of Youth, the official observed, is only one part of a large and sophisticated educational program under which foreigners of many ages are brought to Cuba for courses which range from six months of guerrilla training to instruction in agitation, propaganda and party organization.

''Even though Cuba is a developing country, it is willing to devote this kind of money to an educational program that, in its kindest view, is rather deficient and at its worst is training guerrillas and terrorists,'' he said. Whether the purpose of the program is education or indoctrination, or both, the magnitude of the Cuban effort is impressive. There are more than 9,000 foreign students and 17,000 Cuban students on the Isle of Youth. All the foreigners and 14,000 of the Cubans are enrolled in what are called ''basic secondary schools in the country,'' live-in schools for seventh, eighth and ninth graders who range in age from 12 to 18. All of the students are on scholarships, for which they qualified either by winning in academic competitions or through the recommendation of political groups in their home countries.

Before the revolution, 11,000 people lived on the island, including some White Russians and Chinese who, ironically, had come seeking refuge from Communism. Now, with Cuban and foreign students (who are not universally popular with the locals), the population of the island is about 80,000.

The Angolans, who were the first of the foreigners to arrive, have 2,300 students enrolled. There are a like number from both Mozambique and Ethiopia, 1,100 from Nicaragua, and smaller groups from South-West Af rica, also known as Namibia; Congo, and Guinea-Bissau. Each country has its own school buildings and a teaching staff that includes a sm all number of its own nationals.

The schools, whose buildings resemble stacks of concrete wafers, are set apart from one another by groves of citrus trees. These trees thrive on land that for many years yielded only pine trees, but now, under relentless irrigation, bears thousands of grapefruit trees. The fruit is grown for export and for juice designated for Cuban hospitals, schools and day centers. Each school cultivates about 1,200 acres. Before the revolution in 1959, there were only 1,730 acres in citrus on the entire island, which measures some 32 miles north to south and 39 miles east to west. Now there are 59,280 acres in citrus and the ultimate aim is 98,800 acres.

In the years before the Cuban revolution, the island was best known for its marble quarry, its crocodiles, its parrots, its isolation and its prisoners. Jose Marti, who became the leader of the Cuban struggle for independence from Spain, was deported there in leg irons at the age of 17, in 1870. Fidel Castro and others who attacked the Moncada army barracks at Santiago de Cuba during the reign of Fulgencio Batista were imprisoned in the cruelly named Model Prison from 1953 until an amnesty freed them 20 months later. The prison, now empty, is a shrine to the Cuban revolution, as is the narrow bed hung with mosquito netting in which Castro slept in isolation in a hospital which had been converted into a jail. The guides on tours through these places speak with some passion about the inhumanity of the torture cells and the tiers of tiny

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cells without bars - the easier to hurl inmates to their deaths in the courtyard below - but do not mention the thousands who were imprisoned on the island after Castro came to power.

Visiting journalists almost always ask school officials whether the island is not still, for some, a prison, referring to reports for the last two years that some African students had been brought to Cuba against their will and/ or without the consent of their parents to do hard field labor and to spend years being indoctrinated as revolutionaries.

''That was a false rumor constructed to provoke us, to denigrate us,'' insisted Medard Momengoh, the Congolese Ambassador to Havana, whose country was the focus of the stories. ''If the (Young Communist) Pioneers, instead of going to Cuba, had gone to France or England or the United States, the press wouldn't have criticized it,'' he said during a recent telephone interview in Cuba.

''The President came to Cuba in early September 1979'' for the conference of nonaligned nations in Havana, the Ambassador said. ''The Pioneers left Congo at the end of that month. It was impossible for him to br ing 600 Pioneers with him.''

A version of the ''rumor'' printed in the March 14, 1980 issue of a British magazine said that the Congolese President, Col. Denis Sassou Nguesso, had been accompanied on his trip to Cuba by 25 children who did not return to Africa when he did. These children, according to this report, were soon followed by about 600 other Congolese youngsters, whose parents had been told that their offspring were being given a Cuban holiday in recognition of their exceptional abilities. When the youngsters boarded their planes for the flight to Havana, Air Afrique crew members found they did not all have written statements from their parents giving consent for the journey, an international requirement for children under the legal age traveling on their own. Two foreign-born pilots were reported to have refused to make the flight, and departures were delayed for some time

until substitutes could be found.

A State Department official familiar with Cuban matters noted that after these reports and rumors surfaced, a number of African governments rushed to Cuba's defense and denied the allegations. ''We honestly don't know whether these rumors are true,'' a State Department official said, ''but the rumors persist.''

Ambassador Momengoh contended that twice as many students applied for scholarships at the Isle of Youth schools as were accepted. Those now studying on the island, he says, include the nephew of the Congolese President as well as the children of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Public Works and the Minister of Labor. His own daughters, Paule, 15, and Chantal, 13, also attended. ''If we weren't in this seriously,'' he said, ''I personally wouldn't have sent my own daughters there.'' The Ambassador said he had four other children in Cuban schools and that ''if I had to go home tomorrow, I would want to leave my children here.''

At first, he said, some of the Congolese students did not like the work at the school. Later, he said, they adapted. The Cuban education, he said, ''strips petit-bourgeois pretensions. The students understand the need for a person to put himself in the service of his country.''

Alt hough th ere are college-level study programs in East Germany andthe Soviet Un ion, the Congolese Ambassador said that ''without fear of being mist aken, Cuba has united the realities of the third world and the reali ties of Africa. Perhaps it's not unique, but it respondsmost closely to the realities of our country.''

The two countries have agreed, Ambassador Momengoh said, that Congolese students will go on to Cuban universities and that ''each will be directed according to his abilities. Some will have to fit our needs for engineers and doctors, and for the military.''

It is difficult to learn with absolute certainty the true circumstances under which any of the foreign students have come to the Isle of Youth, a difficulty compounded when a visitor is from the United States, which is the target of a good amount of adverse propaganda on the island. In a series of interviews, some at random, all the children said they had wanted to come here to study, and school officials could produce documents showing either a parent or a teacher having apparently given permission for each child to come. A number of children, however, said they had run away from home and that their parents did not know where they were. Many others said that one or both parents were dead. Erica Shajudah was 17, one of some 600 Namibian students at Hendrick Whitbooi School, named for the tribal chief who is considered the George Washington of Namibia.

Like many of her compatriot students, Erica made her way to the Isle of Youth through the refugee camps in neighboring Angola. She slowly revealed, in answer to many questions, that she was one of seven children of a farmer in Ovambo, where her family lived in a house of ''grass and sticks.'' She and a group of school friends left Namibia of their own free will in 1977 with guerrillas belonging to the South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO). ''My mother didn't see me leave,'' Erica said. ''Afterward, it was impossible to communicate.

''I was in Cassinga,'' she continued, ''a refugee camp with children, women and old men. In the morning time, while we were preparing to go to school, the South African airplanes were bombing us. I started to run away to hide myself. I went to the trenches. I was just pretending like a person who was dead.'' She lay in the trench for about 11 hours, until friendly soldiers came.

A poster on the wall of her school reported that the 1978 attack left 165 men, 294 women and 300 children dead, and 200 missing at Cassinga, which at the Whitbooi school is a synonym for ''massacre.''

''We were 12,'' said Erica of the group with whom she first set out from Namibia. ''Five of them are dead. Some of the others, they are here. Although my friends are dead, I will continue fighting. I want to be a doctor. In Namibia, it would be impossible.''

Doesn't she miss her family, so far away no w? ''The South African regime has propaganda,' ' her 15-year-old classmate Ruana Hanghuwo answered. ''They say all the kids, they diedin Cassinga. We don't think about our familie s.''

Erica said nothing. Bernard Kamwi, a member of SWAPO, was, at the time of this reporter's visit, one of six Namibians on the faculty of the Whitbooi school, which had 32 Cuban instructors teaching mathematics and the sciences and supervising farm work.

The 31-year-old Mr. Kamwi said he had degrees in sociology, sales management and marketing, law, adult education and public relations. ''I taught at the police college in Zambia - a law instructor -for four years,'' he said. ''I was also the founder of the television program 'Police and You.' '' He brightened considerably as he described his television career, which ended at the request of SWAPO. ''When they want you,'' he said, ''they get you.'' SWAPO sent him to teach in Zambia in 1976, then to a school in Angola and after that to the Isle of Youth.

''Education in Namibia is run by the racist South African Government,'' Mr. Kamwi said, explaining the advantage of studying in Cuba. ''A peasant in the Kavango region will be taught in that dialect. A peasant in Kaokoveld will speak that dialect.'' In Cuba, he said, the children learn that they have one homeland -Namibia - and one language - English - as an aid in uniting the different tribes under one tongue.

In a math class, Pedro Fernandez, a Cuban, was instructing the students in square roots. A teacher of great enthusiasm, he punctuated his lecture with questions: ''Yes or no? Truth or lie?'' The classroom was quiet and cool, the air flowing through slatted windows. The children were so attentive that at times they seemed to be holding their breath.

The library of the Whitbooi school contained the works of Marx and Stalin. On its shelves could also be found Sinclair Lewis's ''Main Street,'' the stories of Edgar Allan Poe and Jack London, Maxim Gorky's ''The Mother'' and Alexandre Dumas's ''The Three Musketeers.'' The biography section featured, among others, Charlie Chaplin, Erne sto (Che) Guevara, Salvadore Allende, Ho Chi Minh, Jose Marti, Lenin and Malcolm X.

One student was reading a paperback, with a flowered cover, ''Let Peace Rule,'' by Leonid Brezhnev. Another was painstakingly copying and learning,

for an English class, these comparisons:
as easy as A B C as slippery as a reed as soft as butter as shy as a schoolgirl as dark as the night as white as the snow as vigilant as a star as brave as a soldier as wise as Solomon as stupid as a donkey as patient as Job as lucky as a lark

In spite of some of the lesson's biblical allusions, there is only one title - three copies of ''The Roots of Religion'' -on the shelf labeled ''Mythology and Religion.''

A third child was writing an essay: ''My name is Izamba Stukmgo. I am a girl. I am 14 years old. I go to school every day. I am tall and fat. I live in a house. My father is rich. My country is Namibia. I love my country very much. Our motherland is not free. It is under colonialization. Racist South Africa is ruling our country by force. SWAPO is a revolution of many of the Namibian people. Comrade Sam Nujoma is our leader. We are fighting for our independence. I am a student, but I am a freedom fighter, too.'' ''We are not interested in forming parasites who despise physical work, but men capable of respecting work and what it can accomplish,'' declared Jose Ramon Fernandez Alvarez, the Cuban Minister of Education.

Mr. Fernandez, a tall man with a gravelly voice and a gentle manner who was a former vice minister of the Cuban armed forces, had fought on the side of the victorious Cubans at the Bay of Pigs. A 1953 graduate of the United States Army Field Artillery School at Fort Sill, Okla., he was one of Los Puros, or the Pure Ones, a group of military officers imprisoned on the Isle of Pines for conspiring against Batista.

''We have 14,000 students in Cuba from 30 different countries, although not all in large quantities,'' he said. In addition to those on the Isle of Youth, there are 1,000 in universities, 1,000 in technical schools and the rest in primary and secondary schools.''

Of the 54 schools on the Isle of Youth, 17 are for foreigners. They are, as Mr. Fernandez explained, expensive to operate: Each school costs $1.7 million to build and $572,000 a year to operate. The cost per student - for food, medicine, books and teachers' salaries -is $950 a year. Participating countries contribute teachers, b ut the Cuban Government pays their salaries, as it d oes all other operating expenses. ''We are poor,'' Mr. Fernandez said. ''We t ake the little we have and give it to others who are poorer than we are and need it more than we do. It's not like charity from some e ccentric millionaire who is giving his money away.''

Athough many of the students on the Isle of Youth say they hope to become doctors, their course of study will depend not only on their own wishes and abilities but also on the needs of their countries.

Some will become skilled workers, some technicians, and others will be asked to study those professional specialties most needed by their countries: agronomy, veterinary medicine (vital in the agricultural economy of third-world countries), teaching, engineering and medicine.

''It is sad to see a country like Angola with six or seven million inhabitants and 130 Angolan doctors,'' Mr. Fernandez said, reflecting over coffee in a small suite in a Havana hotel where high-ranking officials

occasionally meet or receive guests. ''Guinea-Bissau has three doctors. In truth, I can tell you there is neither justice nor humanity when for a million inhabitants there are three doctors. There are people who have never seen a doctor in all of their lives.''

''We do not want to Cubanize them,'' he said of the foreign students. ''We want to maintain their cultural roots, languages, artistic expressions, knowledge of history and love for their ancestors. We don't want to make them into Cubans, only into professionals who will be more useful to their countries.''

Is there any fear that some students will want to remain in Cuba, as so many foreign students do in the United States? ''If any of them stays here, it would be a failure for us. They are needed over there.'' ''The literacy rate?'' asked Mohammed Yimer, a teacher at Mengistu Haile Mariam School, one of four for Ethiopian students. ''In Ethiopia, it is better to speak of the illiteracy rate. That is 93 to 97 percent . In many provinces, the literacy rate is zero. Practically, you could say we didn't have any schools.''

There were 554 students at this school, and many said they had lost their fathers. ''My father was a patriot and was killed in battle,'' said Alemayehu Haile Selassie, 18. ''I want to study in a university. I'd like to study medicine. There has never been a doctor in my family before.''

There was a small museum in the school. It contained models of Ethiopian houses, weapons, harps, and shields. It will be years before some of these children return home.

''We are doing our best not to forget our country,'' Mr. Yimer said. At the Carlos Fonseca School for Nicaraguan students, the teachers did not yet have books with an acceptable version of their country's history; the names of some of the places in their country have changed, making geography lessons a bit complicated. But the teachers seemed delighted to have their students in Cuba.

''We have much in common,'' said Jose Antonio Ramirez Aubert, 28, one of five Nicaraguan teachers at the school. ''Cuba freed itself from illiteracy in 1971. Illiteracy is an inheritance that the Somoza regime left us, a great malignant legacy. After the military war, the war which follows is to construct the revolutionary socialist regime. Cuba has had 22 years since its revolution. The experience of their 22 years will help us move.''

Still, there had been quite a flap with the Nicaraguan students over religion. Many of the girls had arrived carrying religious statues under their arms and had been shocked when told that the Cubans forbade religious gatherings in the schools. (Nicaragua is a devoutly Roman Catholic country, and the Bishop of the Nicaraguan capital of Managua has visited the island and the school.) A compromise was reached. The Cubans agreed to take the Nicaraguan students to Nueva Gerona, the main town on the Isle of Youth, and drop them off at the Roman Catholic church so they could attend mass. (Elsewhere on the Isle of Youth, the Lutheran church has been turned into a science museum.)

There were no sophisticated educational aids - no computers and only the most basic equipment in biology and chemistry labs. For students of this age, there did not seem to be any military training although, when they assembled for their morning and afternoon inspections, they lined up in military formation. At

the Fifth of February School, named for the Congo's Fifth of February Movement that Ambassador Momengoh credited with returning democratic process to his country, the dormitories were spartan, with a slight military air to them. As at all the other schools, each bed had a cheap suitcase alongside it and a few clothes hanging in an open closet at the foot of the bed. On top of each bed was a towel twisted into the shape of a hook. There was no privacy, and there were few personal possessions.

The students spent half of every day but Sunday caring for cit rus and, at a few schools, other crops. Their lab or clearly has an economic value but does not, Cubans say, cove r for their expenses. They work because the Cubans believe that wor k and study belong together.

For the 469 boys and 104 girls, aged 12 to 15, at the Fifth of February school, the day began as it did at all the other schools, with a flag-raising ceremony just as the sky started to redden. Half the children were in work clothes and half in school uniforms. The first group worked in the citrus groves in the morning while the second studied. After lunch, the two groups changed places.

The closely planned day had its escapes. At midday, a mock sword fight with sticks was under way near the cafeteria. The solitary tree in a bare field nearby was full of children who had climbed up into its shade, out of the burning sun. Now and then, students had wandered away from their schools and upset local farmers by digging up and eating their yucca plants.

Although school officials said some students have had to be sent home for a variety of reasons, including disciplinary problems, they would not provide details and said the number was ''very few.''

Students were not allowed to leave the school area by themselves, but they did go in groups to the beach, to athletic competitions between schools and to dances. On Saturday nights, the streets of Nueva Gerona were so full of students ''you can't get a car into the street,'' said Jorge Romero Cordero, a principal of one of the Angolan schools. When the school year ends each June, students from Cuba can go home for the months of July and August, as can the Nicaraguans. There is as yet no established policy for home visits for African students, whose homes are so much farther away.

''The Namibian students have been here for two years,'' said Jorge Romero Cordero. ''What are they going to see when they go there? A refugee camp? Their parents de ad?''

But last summer, all the students from Angola, who had been in Cuba for two years, did go home for a visit. At the end of the vacation, one of them was gamely trying to finish a forbidden bottle of Havana Club mint-flavored rum as his plane made its final approach to Nueva Gerona. He looked ill and unsteady, and the Cuban passengers laughed and looked sympathetic. In all of the schools on the Isle of Youth, there were pictures of national heroes and also of Cuba's (Che)Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos, one of Castro's most popular lieutenants. There were, however, no photographs of Fidel Castro, and the libraries, at his request, did not carry books about him because, he insists, he does not want a ''personality cult.'' Nonetheless, on one of the rulerstraight roads that slice across the Isle of Youth there was a billboard displaying Castro's picture and one of his sayings: ''Our causes will triumph because

they are just.''

Castro has visited the island frequently. It is a favorite place to bring high-ranking visiting dignitaries. Groups of foreign teachers and farmers also come to the island to see the schools and are greeted by students who may perform a dance or a little skit, often attacking Western ''imperialism.'' There is a ceramic factory on the Isle of Youth, part of an industry the Government of Cuba is trying hard to encourage and expand as a way to earn tourist dollars and foreign exchange. In an office at this factory hangs another version of the Treasure Island mural in the Colony Hotel.

In it, six Young Communist ''Pioneers'' are getting off the sailing ship to establish a beachhead in a jungle. Instead of a treasure box, they carry a red flag.

GRAPHIC: Illustrations: photo of Congolese students at flag-lowering ceremony photo of student with photos of Che Guevara and Cienfuegos photo of classroom photo of Ethiopian students in citrus groves photo of Namibian students photo of students playing table tennis

SUBJECT: EDUCATION AND SCHOOLS; INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS; COMMUNISM (THEORY AND PHILOSOPHY); SOCIALISM (THEORY AND PHILOSOPHY)

GEOGRAPHIC: CUBA